1:Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942
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to be most prevalent. Rain-storms and cloud continue to alternate with brilliant periods throughout March and April, till in May the pleasant season of trade winds once more begins. 132

Under these humid conditions the west coasts of all the larger islands suffer the most, the east coasts being more open to the refreshing trades. Most favourably situated of all are the Small Islands, which are among the most pleasant spots in the whole archipelago. Here the temperature rarely rises above 95° Fahrenheit, even in the hot weather, and though the moisture makes this feel much hotter than a similar temperature in a dry climate, the nights are nearly always cool.

Geology.

While the geological composition of the larger islands of the group varies and most are mountainous, the highest peak in Santo rising to a height of some 4500 feet, there is little doubt that the whole group owes its position above the surface of the ocean to volcanic action. There is on many islands, including Malekula, evidence that this action has taken place in abrupt stages, seen in the coral terraces that rise in giant steps, clothed in thick jungle, up the mountain-sides, each representing a sudden elevation of the land. Though this has doubtless been the general trend, contrary cases of submergence are also on record, such as that of two reefs situated between Atchin and Vao which formerly were populous islands, the story of whose submergence is told below.[1] 133

Except in the case of a few well-populated coral islets, however, all minor natural features are obscured from observation by a uniform mass of dark green bush formed of huge trees and tangled undergrowth coming right down to the shore of the larger islands, relieved only in some cases, as in North Malekula, by the light green of the bamboo groves capping the mountains which rise behind. Here and there, if one approaches closer, small groves of coconut trees close to the coast mark the presence of human habitation. But, owing to the necessity of sheltering their dwellings from the hurricanes, it is rare that any house is ever visible from the sea. Save for the meeting of an occasional canoe, however thickly the land may be populated, the only sign of life visible from a boat is in the season for burning the bush for new gardens, when tall columns of smoke may be seen from the interior climbing up into the still air. In most places, also, the coast is fringed with coral reefs, making approach dangerous except by means of the few channels carved through them by the fresh water from some mountain stream. 131 133

Fauna.

On the other hand, though the sea abounds with sharks and certain low-lying areas are infested with mosquitoes and fever, no native need 136

[1] See Chapter XXII.

1:Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942
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133 point, as a rule cross over to the mainland and from there go by foot behind the promontory till they come out in front of this most northerly island, to which, sooner or later, they will get taken in a Vao canoe. For those who venture by sea the "Lip of Ta-har" is found to divide itself into three smaller promontories, after rounding the first of which the extreme north-eastern point of Vao comes into view. Seaward, the surf breaks on the two half-submerged reefs of Tolamp and Mal-weaweng already referred to, which were once islands inhabited by folk some of whose descendants are now refugees on Vao. Keeping well to landward of these, and rounding the last point, the whole island of Vao comes into view, sprawling in the tropical sea.

THE ISLAND OF VAO

Main physical features. First view of the natives.

This island is roughly square, containing about 250 acres, or rather less than half a square mile of land, on which about 400 people live.[1] Its curving coastline accounts for the fact that its longest east-to-west axis is rather over half a mile long.

[137] The whole island is covered with vegetation, but the humus in which it grows is in most places not more than a foot and a half deep. Below this, on the side facing the channel, is a layer, not more than a foot thick, of sand, below which is a thin layer of hard volcanic ash.[2] Below

[312] this again is sand, in which fresh water appears when the level of the sea is reached. It is from this source that the natives obtain their water supply, by means of artificially dug pits. The level rises and falls with the rise and fall of the tide. Its comparative freshness is probably due to the filtering action of the sand through which it passes, but its sea origin is seen in the fact that when left to stand it very quickly becomes stale.[3]

[134] This sandy soil exists only on the south and west parts of the island. To the north and east it is replaced by a kind of clay formed by the decomposition of coral rocks. The highest point marked on the Admiralty chart is 120 feet. Seen from the mainland, however, this elevation is hardly visible, on account of the trees which from a distance appear to cover the whole ground. For, as is the case with all the Small Islands, no sign of habitation is seen from the sea.

Only as we approach the islet itself do we become aware of the rare

[1] For discussion of past and present population see Appendix I.

[2] Godefroy, 1, 1913, pp. 31, 32. He adds that the thin layer of hard volcanic ash is found also in Oba, where the word for ash is *gwis*, and that for the hard volcanic layer is *gwengwea*.

[3] Really fresh water can be obtained only from the streams that flow from the mountains on the adjacent mainland, which the natives bring over in large hollow bamboos, the free ends of which are stopped with leaves.

3: Harrisson N-5 (1934-1935) 1936
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Tomman Island canoe and long-headed men

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Clearing for a garden in South Malekula

[facing p. 333]